

Sophie, Now

by Mary McCluskey

You avert your eyes. You understand that there's a problem with Sophie and you are stiff with embarrassment. You pick up vegetables; you examine a lettuce.

I know that my sister has disturbed you. She was standing too close. Then she said something in a voice too loud and broken before shuffling off among the supermarket shelves.

I move closer, aware of the strained quality of my smile.

I want to tell you - she used to swing on the branch of a tree over the brook near our house. She was fearless. She fell into the water once and emerged covered in leeches. As we picked them off, she was still laughing.

She won a scholarship when she was just seventeen to a famous art college.

Our mother said: Come on, our Sophie? She's not an arty person.

- But I can teach it, Sophie said.

And went off to teachers' training instead and later she hung her students' work on the classroom walls and talked about her kids as if she had given birth to them.

Then, on a night that looked like any other, with a full moon and a diary full of meetings with friends, she fell down the stairs in her own small house, onto her all-wool Berber carpet.

When they said to us there's possible brain damage we asked - how possible? What are the chances here? Where are the figures? She is so bright. Her IQ is in the high percentiles.

- Not any more, a young doctor said.

The Head of the Unit turned his face just a fraction, the muscles around his mouth sharpened into shards, his eyes shot darts at that young doctor.

- We don't know how it might evolve, he said.

And then he talked of subarachnoid haemorrhage and haematoma and left temporal subdural bleeds.

It was another language. Words so lyrical, so lovely, we never understood their meaning.

Her head tilts at an odd angle these days. You glance at her, a fast, sideways look. You slide away cautiously. Politely. You don't want to be rude.

Sophie turns with a pack of peaches in her hand. They are net covered, but underneath the net the soft velvet skin is visible. She breaks a hole in the net with her thumb then slowly, carefully, inserts one finger. She strokes each individual fruit, smiling, then lifts the pack to her face and sniffs.

- Oh, she says. Oh.

Then she offers them to you.

You stand in your trainers, an old, tired tee-shirt and sweatpants. Your toddler is arching his back in his stroller and you hesitate. Then – you smile. You smile.

- Thank you, you say.

And I think: thank you, thank you, thank you.